

Feminist Sensibility of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract:

Different writers and thinkers have described feminism in different ways. But in literary sense, feminism is physical and psychic emancipation of women from the tough traditional clutches of man. Since ancient time in the world, particularly in Asian countries and in India, the social custom and creeds have been ruled by man. In the Vedic tradition women have been denied to recite Holy Mantras. Likewise, Burqa clad Muslim women were not allowed to act with liberty in society. What they have made of women may certainly be found in Afghanistan during Taliban regime and the Sati Pratha which still exists in some part of our country. In this paper, I endeavour to present how Shashi Deshpande has tried to bring out a sensible balance among her female characters between modernity and tradition through her feminist sensibility. Many writers and artists, in course of time, have raised their voice over the sad plight and exploitation of women by men. Anudhati Roy and Taslima Nasrin, among other women writers, may be cited as glaring example to protest against the suppression and depression of womankind.

Indian woman writers continue to occupy a place of importance and significance in Indian English fiction for reasons more than one. It projects the responses of more than half of humanity and reflects a consciousness constructed by gender. Women's writing has questioned the existing viewpoints which are essentially patriarchal, conventional and traditional. Indian fiction has been enriched by several highly talented women novelists including Kamala Markaynadaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahagal, Attia Hossan, Anudhati Roy, Sentha Remarora and Shashi Deshpande. They have written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. In their writings, they have analysed socio-cultural modes and values that have given to Indian women their images and roles towards of themselves and society. Their chief contribution consists of their exploring of their moral and physic dilemmas and repercussions of their women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges and to achieve harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings.

Shashi Deshpande has earnestly been accepted as a significant literary figure on the contemporary scene. She was born in a famous educated Brahmin family in 1938 at Dharwad in Karnataka. She acquired intellectual bent of mind and love for learning from her father Adya Rangachar, a dramatist and Sanskrit scholar. At the age of 15, she went to Mumbai, graduated in economics and move to Bangalore where she got degrees in Laws, English and diploma in journalism. She is such a "voracious reader"¹.

Shashi Deshpande writes as human being neither as a man nor as woman. She explains her view point in her article - THE DILEMMA of A WOMAN WRITER, that there must not be any category or group on the basis of gender discrimination. She holds that 'literature has to be valued in the social context, but to apply the tag of feminist is one way dismissing the serious concerns of novels by labelling them by calling the work propagandist'. She is quite against propagandist. She asserts that it means exactly the same when a man writes of the particular problems a man is facing, he is writing male propagandist. She says:

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All this kind of writing feminist, humorous and Pornographic has its place in women writings as it has in the writing of man. For woman, particularly after so many years of silence..... woman have every right to express themselves any way they want. What is wrong that the woman who writes romances, mysteries, historical fiction and serious fiction are all lumped together as women writers.²

Shashi Deshpande began her literary career in 1970 with the publications of a collection of short stories. Her first novel "The DARK HOLDS NO TERROR" was published in 1980, and after that she wrote – IF I DIE TODAY (1982), COME UP AND BE DEAD (1983), ROOTS AND SHADOWS (1993), THAT LONG SILENCE (1988), THE BINDING VINE (1992), A MATTER OF TIME (1996) and SMALL REMEDIES (2000).

Shashi Deshpande's novels represent the contemporary Indian modern women's struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. Her female characters are at great pains to free themselves from stultifying traditional constraints. The social and cultural changes in the post independent India have made the women conscious of the need to define themselves, their place in society and their relationship with their surroundings. Shashi Deshpande's concern is to explore root cause of fragmentation and dichotomy of characters and to find out what happens in their psyche in the process of their individuation. She has successfully delineated their problems and plights, yearnings and aspiration, success and failures.

Women occupy a central place in Shashi Deshpande's novel. Deshpande's earnest aim is to analyse the image of woman in her novels as well as in her short stories. Women, today, play diverse roles both indoors and outdoors. She participates in all the hitherto male dominated spheres. Consequently, she faces the fact of tossing between tradition and modernity.

Female quest for identity has been a pet theme for many a woman novelist. Deshpande has also been one of them. For her portrayal of the predicament of middle class educated Indian women, their inner conflict and quest for identity, issues pertaining to parent-child relationship, marriage and sex and their exploitation. Deshpande has been called a feminist but she favours feminism in a broad sense. The publication of "THAT LONG SILENCE", by the Virago Press London made its own contribution to this belief. Her apparently contradictory remarks to an interviewer lent further support to it. Asked whether she would like to call herself a feminist, she replied to Geeta Gangadhara:

Yes, I would, I am a feminist in the sense that, I think we need to know a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that the fact that we are human is much more important than our being men or women. I think that is my idea of feminism.³

In the 1980s and 1990s feminist social theory has been influenced by post structuralism and post-modernist analysis. Following past modernist emphasis on difference and plurality, feminist theorists have argued that traditional feminist analysis tended to reflect the view point of white middle class women of North America and Western Europe.

In post-independence feminism, Indian English literature is by product of western feminist movement but it got substance from our freedom struggle under the dynamic humanitarianism of Mahatma Gandhi, independent spreads of educations, employment opportunities and laws for women's right. Western feminism could not be followed in Indian society because we have a different history, different ethos and different form of stratification and patriarchal domination.

Novels written during the last two decades of twentieth century provide an exploration into the female psyche and deal with a full range of feminine experiences. Feminist studies emerged as an offshoot of the women's liberation movement. Many writers, especially Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Sobha De, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Das took the cause of women in their writings. Shashi Deshpande made it absolute clear that she has nothing to do with feminism in the narrow sense. In her

interview to Ashvini Sarpeshkar Tondon, for example, she declared, "I don't like to be branded this or that because life is more complex than that. My enduring concern is human relationships. I certainly don't think my novels are man vs woman at all"⁴. Deshpande, being a woman herself, sympathizes with women. She told an interviewer "I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world"⁵. She does admit the influence of western but to a certain extent. She tells M. Ritti clearly:

One does not know what influences one as a writer. I have read a lot of feminist novelists and understand what they are trying to say easily. However, I began reading feminist writing recently, while my writing has reflected feminist ideas right from the start.⁶

It is in this light that Deshpande's concerns for Indian women must be considered. Arbitrary appellation and dragging her works in the fold of militant feminism of the western variety would be unjust and unbelievable.

According to Alice Jardine feminism is a movement from the point of view of, by and for women. Deshpande had portrayed the new Indian woman and her dilemmas, her effort to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother, sister and above all as human being in the tradition-bound, man dominated society.

Deshpande's novels contain so much that can be regarded as the staple material of feminist thoughts, women's sexuality, the gender roles, self-discovery, dreams and realization and so on. She can be called a feminist in a specific sense. Her interview with Laxami Holmstrom throws significant light on her stand:

I now have no doubt at all in saying that I am a feminist in my own life I mean. But now consciously as a novelist I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly. very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started my feminism, and it was much latter that I actually read books about it.⁷

To Shashi Deshpande's mind, no account of theorizing will solve women's problem, especially in Indian context. Elucidating her viewpoints, she further remarks:

But to me feminism is not a matter of theory, it is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminist without realizing it.⁸

So, we see that unlike hard-core feminists, Deshpande's approach is sincerely sensible. She does not agree that being a mother or wife or sister is something that is unnecessarily imposed on women. According to her, 'it is needed' She craves for a greater and harmonious sense of balance. She says, may be, I want to reach a stage where I can write about human beings and not about men or women. For, I do not believe in having a propagandist or sexist purpose of my writing.

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